

Suggested Remarks
Joseph A. Mussomeli, Chargé d'Affaires
Stakeholders Dialogue on the ARMM Elections
August 3, 2005, 9:30 a.m.
Mindanao State University
Marawi City

Distinguished Guests,

Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning.

I want to thank Dr. Umpa and all of you here with Mindanao State University for graciously hosting us this morning to talk about the August 8, 2005 elections in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). While many have speculated that these elections would be postponed, with a little less than a week to go now, it looks as if they will push through next Monday as

planned. With this in mind, I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the U.S. Government's strong support for democracy here in the ARMM and throughout the Philippines, and to tell you about our support to Philippine initiatives to make the elections next Monday successful.

Certainly, there are many factors that determine how democratic a society is - the degree to which it provides for a rule of law, protects human rights, promotes the free exchange of ideas, and governs with transparency and accountability, just to name a few. While these are all very important, if you had to place one factor

above all others, it would have to be the conduct of free and fair elections.

Here in the ARMM, for the elections to successfully take place next Monday, several things are needed. The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) will have to do its part to ensure the integrity of the vote and the counting and canvassing process. ARMM civil society also plays a very important complementary role in this regard, and the U.S. Government is very proud to assist their efforts. Through a grant to the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is supporting a consortium of ARMM

nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to conduct voter education and monitor the polls on election day.

Meeting last month in Cotabato City, these ARMM NGOs agreed to a common plan for voter education and election monitoring and formed the Citizens' Coalition for ARMM Elections. Since then, the coalition's members have been making a real difference by educating voters at the grass roots on how COMELEC will run the election and encouraging people to exercise their rights and responsibilities as ARMM citizens -- to participate in the democratic process by voting and voting responsibly.

We are also very pleased that the membership of the Citizens' Coalition for ARMM Elections will be monitoring this election along with other groups such as the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) and the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL). At its best, effective monitoring not only works to keep an election free and fair and uncover problems where they may exist, but it also helps inspire the electorate's confidence in the results once the votes are cast and counted.

In addition to supporting grass-roots efforts to promote a free and fair ARMM election, the U.S. Embassy is planning an election observer mission for the polls next

Monday. We always value the opportunity to visit the ARMM, which has its own perspectives on democracy in the Philippines. We will be working with IFES and other nongovernmental organizations to observe the election in a transparent and unobtrusive manner. We understand that other diplomatic missions, including those of Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada, will be observing the ARMM election as well. It certainly is not our intention to interfere or get in the way. We simply hope that the presence of U.S. and other international observers will support the democratic process.

In our interactions with residents here in the ARMM, we have been particularly gratified to see so many people committed to democracy and free and fair elections. The U.S. Government, and indeed the international community as a whole, shares your interest in a free and fair election in the ARMM on August 8, 2005. We support Philippine democracy and free, fair, clean, and credible elections here and around the world and we want to see your young democracy thrive.

Now, perhaps I can make some personal remarks.

As many of you know, I will be leaving the Philippines shortly to take on a new job as American Ambassador to Cambodia. In fact, my participation in this event here with you this morning will be one of my final actions as a member of the American Diplomatic Mission here in the Philippines.

Like most diplomats who serve in the Philippines, I am leaving this country with very mixed emotions. While I am looking forward to my new responsibilities and new opportunities in Cambodia, I am, frankly, very sad to be leaving the Philippines. This is a very special country with very special people, and my family and I will miss terribly the many special things about

the Philippines that we have grown to appreciate so much, and the many Filipino friends we have made during our time here.

One of the things I will miss the most is the opportunity I have had to get to know Mindanao and the people of Mindanao. While I didn't have the opportunity to visit Mindanao quite as often as my former boss, Ambassador Ricciardone, (I think he visited Mindanao almost monthly during his tenure here), I have been to Mindanao on at least seven or eight occasions during my service as Chargé or as Deputy Chief of Mission of the American Embassy. I was lucky, I believe, because my assignment here over the last three years coincided with a

period of intense U.S. Government interest in, and involvement with, Mindanao. This interest in Mindanao was manifested by a significant increase in the size of the USAID program here, increased military cooperation, the establishment of our first "virtual consulate" in the Philippines (in Davao), and a seemingly unending series of visits to Mindanao by senior American officials from the different branches of our Government.

If I could, let me elaborate on the U.S. Government's partnership with the many dedicated Filipinos working for development in Mindanao. The USAID program here encompasses activities and projects

across the spectrum -- from building hundreds of roads, bridges, ports, and water systems; to introducing computer and internet education into hundreds of schools; to bringing electric power to thousands of families previously without it; to helping banks learn how to profitably provide loans to, literally, hundreds of thousands of micro-entrepreneurs; to helping assure that hundreds of thousands of children receive the immunizations and vitamin supplementation they need for a healthy life; to helping 28,000 former MNLF combatants develop the means of making a reasonable living for themselves and their families; to helping local governments

to significantly reduce problems of corruption; and many more activities.

I have been impressed both with the range of activities, and with the very positive impact they are having -- both on increasing prospects for economic progress in Mindanao, and on consolidating peace in Mindanao.

As my USAID colleagues constantly point out, however, the people of Mindanao are the ones who really deserve the credit for this. In order to be successful, USAID projects require the participation of committed and capable counterparts -- counterparts in national government agencies, in local government units, in private firms, in

schools and universities, in NGOs, in
literally hundreds of organizations. We
have been blessed by the counterpart
organizations we have had the opportunity to
work with here in Mindanao, and I salute you
all.

Maraming salamat po.

Thank you and good morning.